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ABSTRACT

Objectivity in style description is desirable, but three elements of any literary work make objectivity difficult: subject matter, context, and audience. Keeping aware of these subjective factors can help in achieving a measure of objective description. Two methods of stylistic analysis can be conducive to objectivity: propositional reduction and the use of a computer. Propositional reduction is based on the tenet that any statement has a core or basic proposition that can be elaborated upon in a number of ways. It sifts out style from content--for the proposition is content and all else is style. Two limitations of propositional reduction are that it is slow and laborious and it applies only to sentence units. In dealing with larger quantities of text, the computer offers the closest approximation to objectivity: it does not make errors, it cannot like or dislike, it has no opinions, and it is itself totally objective. Limitations in computer use are that its use implies an objectivity that may not be present in the human programer, the text must be in machine-readable form, and it can deal only in formal matters. (TJ)

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Speaking of Style: How Objective Can One Be?

Mary P. Hiatt

Much style description continues to be a matter of personal taste and personal reaction, and is thus very subjective. It is undeniably difficult to divorce one's pronunciamentos concerning a writer's style from one's opinions of that writer's subject matter, insights, literary milieu, and perhaps even personal life, as well as from the opinions of other critics. In other words, our judgments of style are too often colored by judgments based on non-style aspects of a writer's work.

Implicit in the title of this paper, however, is that objectivity, not subjectivity, in style description is desirable. My remarks will therefore be concerned with the possibility of attaining such objectivity along with the probability that such a goal cannot be fully achieved.

"Objective" means without personal bias. "Objective" means what is there and observable, not what one may or may not like, or may or may not respond to. "Objective" implies a certain detachment, an almost clinical approach to the description of style. Alas, however, we are not clinicians; we generally remain opinionated perceivers, perceiving what we wish, not what is there. It is far easier to express an opinion than to describe. It is, quite simply, hard to be objective.

There are three elements of any literary work that make objectivity difficult and conversely make subjectivity relatively easy. These are the areas of subject matter, context,

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and audience. Any one of these factors has its effect on style; this is beyond question. But none of them in and of itself is style. Written style is the manner, not the matter, not the history or surrounding textual territory, not the reader. Yet it is often the matter, the history, or the effect on the reader that is dealt with under the rubric of style. And our concern with or distraction by these factors can do much to prevent us from accurately viewing the object.

Subject matter is particularly difficult to screen out from our stylistic utterances. It is inescapably true that an adventure novel will present a style that is vastly different from that of the doctoral thesis. Our distaste--or our liking--for fictional adventure almost inevitably tinges our description of style. Our distaste or our liking for the investigation presented in a doctoral thesis--the latter reaction the rather more infrequent, one would imagine--also spills over into our evaluation of style. In a word, if we like what it is about, we often "like" the style. But we equally often do not truly describe the style.

Context is a different matter and is vastly more complicated than content. The problem with context is that it is impossible of definition. Is context the textual surroundings of whatever is being described? If so, then the context of a word might be a sentence. Or it might be only the three words on either side of the word-under-scrutiny. Carrying this approach further, the context of a sentence would be the paragraph. The context of the

paragraph might be the essay, the chapter, or only the surrounding three paragraphs. The context of a book might be the other works by the same author, or it might be all other works of similar nature--or it might even be an historic era.

Context thus shifts constantly. And it can consist of whatever one wishes it to consist of. It can be very confined or almost limitless.

But context is necessary to certain aspect of style, such as irony, which is not discernible without a particular kind of context. The verbal irony in Oedipus Rex, for example, is only evident in the "context" of the audience's knowledge of true identities. An audience who did not know that it was Laius whom Oedipus had killed at the crossroads would see nothing ironic in Jocasta's description of Laius as being "not unlike" Oedipus himself.

The identification of irony as an aspect of style is thus a rather chancey thing, although it is much more easily identified when the necessary context is within the text itself and conveyed by discretely observable aspects of style--words, locutions, patterns, stylistic devices, and the like. Generally speaking, however, we have to be careful not to permit context--whether it is a war, the next page, the other books by the same author--to become confused with style itself.

The third element leading to subjectivity in style descrip-

tion, rather than objectivity, is the audience. Again, we are well aware that any style will be modified by the author's notion of the reader. My course outlines for my remedial composition students are vastly different in style from my course outlines for my advanced literature courses. The Bobbsey Twins does not read like War and Peace, nor do we expect it to. Nonetheless, our lack of a sense of identity with the presumed reader can modify our descriptions of style. We may, in other words, term the style of The Bobbsey Twins as childish solely because its audience comprises children. The actual style that we may tend to call childish, however, may not vary particularly from a style that occurs in books for adults.

Thus, in striving to achieve a measure of objectivity in our stylistic comments, we are often thwarted by the complicating factors of subject, context, and audience. These factors cannot be dismissed from consideration. But, on the other hand, they cannot be incorporated easily or accurately into description of style. They are matters too often dealt with subjectively, beclouding our otherwise impartial and accurate observations. If we are aware of these subjective clouds, though, and if we valiantly keep our eyes on the object rather than on ourselves, we can achieve a measure of objective description.

The stylistician, however, might justifiably feel that it is all very well to promulgate an objective goal in style analysis. No one defends bias. But, as a practical matter, how should one

proceed toward this uncertain goal? Is not the process far more easily "said" than "done"? Perhaps, but it is far from impossible.

I can suggest two methods of stylistic analysis that I have found conducive to objectivity. They are Propositional Reduction, as first posited and developed by Louis T. Milic,[1] and the use of the computer.

Propositional Reduction is based on the tenet that any verbal statement has a core or basic proposition that can be elaborated upon in a number of ways. The concept is not unlike that of the kernel sentence, proposed by Chomsky in earlier times. But there is an important distinction: The Chomskyan kernel is a given deep structure that, through certain obligatory transformations, results in surface structure. The core proposition of a statement in Milic's concept, on the other hand, may be a idea, a simplification and stripping down of the sentence-as-written that may not even contain the same words as the sentence-as-written. In the kernel sentence, the deep structure (or propositional sentence) has a very direct transformational connection with the surface structure, employing the same words. This is not necessarily true of the relationship between Milic's statement (surface structure) and basic proposition. The similarity in the two ideas, however, lies in the fact that the Chomskyan deep and surface structures have the same "meaning," as do the proposition and the statement in Milic's Propositional Reduction.

The main virtue of Propositional Reduction is that the method does sift out style from content, for, in effect, the basic proposition (or the Reduction) is content and all else is style. It is a sentence-by-sentence analysis that is particularly appropriate to relatively small quantities of prose.

Let me offer an example or two of the method.

Milic, in analyzing a sentence from Steele's essay on criticism, Guardian No. 12, makes the following reduction:

Statement: "When a poem makes its first appearance in the world, I have always observed, that it gives employment to a greater number of criticks, than any other kind of writing."

Reduction: A poem always receives much criticism.[2]

It is apparent that in developing the Reduction the original text or statement has been subjected to a kind of deletion process. Unnecessary words and phrases have been removed. Furthermore, imagery (a poem making its first appearance in the world) has been eliminated. One can question the omission of a substitute word for that image, such as "published," but then, there is little question that a poem that receives much criticism is likely to be one in print.

What is missing from the Reduction is precisely those elements of the original Statement that consist of Steele's style--the personal parenthetical remarks, the comparatives, and the mild implied irony of the largely idle critics.

My own study of the style of John Locke also employs Proposi-

tional Reduction. From that study, I offer the following example:

> Statement: "For this purpose, nothing was fit either for Plenty, or Quickness, as those articulate Sounds, which with so much Ease and Variety, he found himself able to make."
>
> Reduction: People found that articulate sounds were the best ways to communicate.[3]

Again, the stripped-down sentence is totally lacking in certain aspects of Locke's style: the use of parallelism and the structural complexity of the sentence.

It can be argued that Propositional Reduction is in itself liable to considerable subjectivity. Who is to say, after all, what the "main idea" or "basic proposition" is in any utterance written by someone else. The answer is, of course, no one. But a very careful reader has at least a fairly good chance of approximating such a proposition. As a matter of fact, a group of readers employing Propositional Reduction often arrives at almost precisely the same basic reduction.[4] There is, apparently, some common agreement as to what the minimal skeletal statement consists of. Once that core content is discovered, the style becomes discernible through a process similar to subtraction. That is, the Statement minus the Reduction equals the Style.

It has also been argued that the Statement and the Reduc-

tion do not have the same meaning, no matter who applies the method, and that the meaning of the two utterances cited is actually far more complex than the meaning of their reductions. That element of "meaning," however, that resides in the original text but not in the reduction is precisely what informs the style. The subtlety and complexity of the original "meaning" is therefore observable via the style and observable, moreover, without losing the distinction between manner and matter.

One limitation of Propositional Reduction is that the method applies only to sentence units and is thus not useful in describing larger structures. The overall organization of an essay, for example, would be difficult to discern through Propositional Reduction alone. On the other hand, when the method is applied to a series of sentences, patterns of style do emerge. The use of parallel structures and the considerable complexity of Locke's sentence cited above prove to be characteristics of his entire Essay on Language, not merely an occurrence in one sentence.

Propositional Reduction is slow and laborious. But it is thorough, concentrated, and extremely useful in controlling any impulse toward unfounded generalizations or subjective impressions.

In dealing with larger quantities of text, however, the computer offers the closest approximation to objectivity. The tool itself is simply that--a tool. It does not make errors. It cannot make critical judgments. It cannot like or dislike. It has no opinions. The computer itself is totally objective.

But behind every computer stands a human being. A person amasses the data that the computer processes. A person writes computer programs. It is distinctly possible, therefore, that the impartial, objective computer can be "made" to produce findings that in and of themselves are not truly objective. Studies, for example, that seek to establish an hypothesis already held by the investigator are likely to be tinged with subjectivity. If one is seeking to prove, for whatever reason, that contemporary prose, say, contains few parallel structures, one could select textual material that would tend to support this view, and one could also develop computer programs that would fail to discover certain types of parallelism. In these ways--that is, through the selection of data and the design of computer programs--computer findings can be biased.

Thus, even with the assistance of a computer, stylistic study can be subjective. Worse, with computer-based research, there is often an automatic assumption of objectivity, whether or not bias does exist. In work with computers, therefore, the stylistician should be careful to avoid subjectivity insofar as possible in both the selection of data and in programing. Otherwise, all the automated wizardry, impeccable calculation, and "infallibility" of the computer can result in something less than an objective analysis.

In my own work using computers to investigate written style, I have dealt with samples of 250,000 words of running text[5] and 200,000 words of running text[6] respectively. Such amounts of

text are not easily handled without the computer: words blur, perceptions flag, and errors are inevitable.

The first study concerns the incidence of parallelism and co-occurring rhetorical devices of repetition in contemporary American prose. In the 250,000-word sample, 108 kinds of parallelism are discovered--far more, and far more accurately, than any human reader could have found or even would have predicted. The plethora of stylistic information generated by the computer in this study was astounding, particularly when compared to the stylistic information that might have been produced by a mere mortal working alone.

The second study concerns the style of contemporary male and female writers. Such aspects of style as adverbs, adjectives, similes, certain types of verbs, parallel structures, sentence length, and sentence- and paragraph-organization are discovered in a 200,000-word sample of prose divided equally between male and female writers. Passages that formed the sample were selected randomly, as were the texts themselves. To have made selections otherwise would, of course, have biased the study. As with my study of parallelism, however, there was far more information than the human mind could have discerned or handled. Nine computer programs were developed, any one of which producing results that the human mind would have taken years to discover.

As we all know, bibliographies, concordances, and some attribution studies have utilized the computer for some time. My feeling is that it is still underutilized in stylistic studies. If

one approaches a computer-assisted study of style with a question-mark as an hypothesis, one can discover far more than he or she would without the computer and also be as certain as possible that the discoveries are real, are true, are--in a word--objective.

The computer does have certain limitations, though, just as has Propositional Reduction. Everyone knows that text for the computer must be in machine-readable form. That alone is enough to deter some researchers from availing themselves of its use. But beyond that, there is also the problem that the computer can deal only in formal matters, unless my own limitations as a programer have misled me. The computer by its nature, then, restricts the stylistic information to that which is available in terms of form, not in terms of connotation. Most matters of style that lie in the area of tone and context (in its broader sense) must be initially perceived by the researcher. If such aspects of style are encoded when perceived by the researcher and are then included in a program, the computer will of course discover them. Otherwise, they are largely beyond the domain of the computer. Note that at issue is <u>not</u> content analysis, as would be offered by a program such as General Inquirer, but style analysis.

On the one hand, therefore, the computer's results can be skewed by biased sample selection or biased programing. On the other hand, certain subtler aspects of style beyond or other than

those discernible by form alone will not be discovered without the prior intervention of the human perceiver.

Overall, however, even with the various drawbacks and problems inherent in both Propositional Reduction and computer usage, the two methods permit the stylistician to come close to an unbiased, objective analysis. The use of one or the other should certainly encourage rather more rigorous and judicious comments about style than those that frequently float through much of our critical literature.

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Notes

[1] Stylists on Style (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 18-20.

[2] "A propositional analysis of Steele's Guardian no. 12," Style and Text, Skriptor 1975, 118-133.

[3] "Locke on Language Via Propositional Reduction," Style, 5 (Fall 1971), 284-299.

[4] Personal observation based on graduate seminars in stylistics.

Notes (cont.)

[5]Artful Balance: The Parallel Structures of Style (New York: Teachers College Press, 1975).

[6]The Way Women Write (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977).